

**Interview with Sally Ormsby
conducted by Linda Byrne for the
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

February 7, 2008

Linda Byrne: I am here today, February 7, 2008 with Sally Ormsby at her home on Coronado Terrace for the purposes of interviewing Sally for our Providence Perspective History Project. Good Afternoon Sally.

Sally Ormsby: Good Afternoon, so good to have you here.

Linda: Your home is lovely with a beautiful view. I am sitting here looking at the beautiful view from your sun porch looking out on your back yard with the gorgeous trees and landscaping. Could you tell me a little about yourself and your early life?

Sally: I was born in Western New York in the small town of Naples, on the Finger Lakes area south of Rochester. I was not only born there, but I went all through school there and then I went to a business school in Buffalo, New York following which I came to Washington, D.C., and I have been in the area every since. I have three brothers all of whom live in the Western New York area including a snowbird who spends 6 months of the year in Florida, so there were four children in the family. I enjoyed the small school atmosphere, but there again there are disadvantages to a small school or big school but, if you wanted to do anything, there was an opportunity.

So, I came to Washington in 1956, 51 years ago, Wow! I was recruited to work for the Central Intelligence Agency and I worked there until 1969 and I got married in 1959 to my husband Clayt and when our first child was expected I resigned from the agency feeling that I really couldn't do justice to having a full time job and overseeing children and the house and everything. So, I have not worked for money since, everything has been volunteer work which I have enjoyed.

Linda: Your resume is quite lengthy when it comes to volunteer work that you have done and continue to do for the entire county. You mentioned to me earlier that you had worked in the area, but if you could go on and tell me a little bit

more about your children and the schools, what the schools in this area were like then as compared to now.

Sally: Our two children were born in 1969 and 1971 and we moved here to this home in Mantua in 1965. At that time Fairfax County was still building a classroom or more a day because of the influx of people coming to Fairfax County. So, our children went to the local elementary which is right here in the neighborhood and then to what we call our local intermediate and high school, Frost Intermediate and Woodson High School both of which had at that time and still have very good reputations.

Sure, I could complain about certain aspects of the education program but I think overall we are very fortunate in that Fairfax parents expect their children to have a good education; in fact they almost demand it. But for the most part the middle class, upper middle class are all professionals so they want the best education for their children so that they can then go on to a good college or university and I think that overall our educational system is very good. We have certainly poured a lot more money in it in the last 15 or 20 years as we could. The Virginia General Assembly has not been terribly generous with us because they feel that we have the ability to pay more for our schools so they are more inclined to allocate more money for the less well off or rural areas of Virginia and I think you could argue that either way. In the areas of Virginia where the economy is not as good as it is here in Fairfax they simply don't have the funding. On the other hand I have heard that whenever they get an increase in assistance from the State then they reduce their local taxes, whether that still holds true, I don't know but I thought that was interesting.

Back in the 60's and 70's parents did not request or demand where their children were going to go to school because of the population influx and the rapid construction of schools they were just satisfied if their children had a place to go to school with a classroom. When the tornado, I think in the early 70's, a tornado hit Woodson High School and the Pickett Shopping Center and took the roof off the Woodson High School thankfully it was a Sunday afternoon so the shopping center was not busy at that time. We made the Blue Laws then and sat a bus in front of the ABC store and removed part of the roof of the Safeway store that was there at that time. So, our high school kids who were going to Woodson had to be for a year I believe, had to be doubled up with the student body at Jackson. They

had a morning shift and an afternoon shift and that is the way the Woodson students got their instructions during that time until the building could be repaired. So that is just a little tidbit that I think is interesting.

Mantua I think is a very interesting community and we get comments about it all the time. It is a big community; we have nearly 1600 homes which means that it is, I believe, the biggest community, if you want to call it that in Providence District. Technically we are not a community because the County Ordinance does not allow us to be a community, we are rather a group of Associations that were build at different times here we do have a few home owner associations within the boundaries of what we call our mentor community but we are not allowed to have a Mantua sign on the Route 236 side of Mantua because the subdivision over there is not called Mantua but it is at the Route 50 entrance.

Linda: What are some of the civic associations that are within your Mantua geographic location?

Sally: The Homeowners Associations are Stockbridge which is where the oil spill problem was, the Briars which is right along Rt. 236 and was built in more recent years probably in the 80's, Copeland Pond where it is just a single street cul-de-sac with probably a dozen or so houses however together they own the pond, Copeland Pond so it is their responsibility to maintain that pond. Those are Homeowner Associations where the people actually have commonly held property, which they are responsible for. So, they have heftier dues not mandatory dues. Mantua Citizens Association is an old fashion civic association which owns nothing, we jointly own no property therefore we don't have to jointly maintain anything. Our citizen's association dues per year are \$20 a year and when you tell people in other associations this, they can't believe it their mouths fall open. But, I think that is a fascinating detail and I tell people that whenever I move the first question I would ask is, is this a citizens association area or a homeowners association area.

Linda: Very important distinction.

Sally: Because Homeowners Associations' are actually micro government's being responsible for their internal roads, sidewalks, amenities, pools, playgrounds and so that puts quite a burden on those people. So I really appreciate the fact that

we are just an organization of people and we actually for that \$20 a year publish a newsletter 10 months of the year and we have a newcomer dinner every March and we have a brunch for the neighborhood watch volunteers and block captains, the same day and we have a holiday party in early December and we have our parade and picnic ending up at the pool in early to mid-June before everybody goes off on vacation.

Linda: Which pool is this?

Sally: The swimming pool that is here in Mantua is a private pool but the membership is from the Mantua area and the environs and so it is a membership pool, you don't have to belong if you have no use for it. It has a good swim and dive program for the kids and a good tennis program for the kids and the adults and of course you can go swim if you want. They also have socials and parties in the summertime.

Linda: Lets talk a little about all your volunteer work and maybe we could start with your interest in soil and water conservation, and the fact that you are, gosh when I look at your accomplishments we have you with Community Appearance Alliance, having been President of that organization, the Northern Regional Commission Storm Water Advisory, we have you with Mothers of Mantua (Sally: No), Environmental Stewardship you received and award in 2007 and you were Citizen of the Year in 2007, so wherever you would like to start if you would

Sally: Well my volunteer service really began right here at home in Mantua and I got involved in the citizens association because I went to a meeting when the children were very small and I came home and I said the leadership there isn't very good. So I went with a friend who also had little ones - so I got involved and have been involved ever since. In fact from Mantua I have been President three different times for two years at a crack and some years were very enjoyable other years were not so enjoyable. In September of 1990 a resident of Mantua noticed a sheen on the water, actually it was a concrete lined conduit behind her house so they called in the experts who took a look at it and one thing led to another and it was discovered that the Texaco Oil Company had actually spilled a lot of oil and gas, hydrocarbon products. This is really serious because when they investigated what we call the plume, the product that is riding on top of the water table, because water and oil don't mix, so in some places this plume was feet thick.

Audrey Moore was the Chairman of the Board at that time and this was technically the responsibility of the Virginia Water Pollution Control Board but that office had only restricted technical staff so the man who would advise us technically had to cover 17 counties up here. Well, it was obvious that he was not going to be able to oversee this. So, Chairman Audrey Moore went to the Federal Government and asked if EPA could please help us resolve this situation, because it was serious, and they agreed. One of the first things that was done was to require the tank farm, Texaco, to install monitoring wells, which are not that expensive to install, if they had had those monitoring wells earlier they would have known they had a problem and could have prevented a lot of this from happening. So the fellow from EPA was a very interesting person he in a way took no prisoners but yet he was pleasant and he was a very active doer. So they tried to as quickly as possible to get a program going to begin the clean up because there was so much plume. But it affected only 17 properties in Mantua out of the 1600 and they were all over on the pier roadside. Thankfully our water table is low enough so the plume or the product did not reach the foundations of the houses so we were extremely lucky there. It turned out after a little while this fellow from EPA who was really doing a cracker jack job was fired because he padded his resume. But actually my personal opinion was that he had done a very good job. I don't know exactly what he had padded, maybe a degree or something but as a result he lost his job.

So that tank farm situation was with us from 1990 until now although the situation has resolved considerably but we still have a liaison committee with Texaco, which is now Chevron because Chevron took over Texaco, so it is the Chevron Mantua Liaison Committee. EPA is still overseeing the technical aspects and they said they would not relieve the tank farm of their clean up responsibilities until the water underground was potable. I don't know if that is ever going to happen but that is what they say.

Linda: That is very interesting.

Sally: It is. In all of the archives, the official files on this whole situation, the spill the cleanup is in the Virginia room, they are the official repositories so they have linear feet of this material.

Linda: Good!

Sally: I have a lot myself and have not thrown it away yet. So we also have a Providence District Council which is an organization made up of the associations, which are within Providence District. Which I believe there are 200 or so within the Providence District. The Council meets once a month to discuss issues that are important or of concern. I was the Chair of that back in the calm days back in the mid 1990's and then they took me dragging and screaming, to the county level, because I really enjoyed working at the community level you could see what you have done and see your accomplishments. But then I became a Delegate to the Federation to the County Federation of Citizens Associations and I have been participating in that ever since and I was President in early to mid 80's. Now I Chair the budget and legislative committees, and I am on the transportation and environmental committees. So then when I was elected to the Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District back in 1999 then I had to expand my focus state wide because they have the State Association of Conservation Districts and it has been a challenge because we here now live in a rather urban area and there aren't very many large tracts left. There are some 5 acre tracts for houses but for the most part it is very urban.

I chaired the urban committee for that State Association of Districts and it is a challenge because a large majority of the area of the state is still rural and the state has programs to share the cost with farmers who are doing agriculture to build facilities to mitigate the storm water run off but they have done nothing for urban areas, nothing. Anything we do comes out of our own pocket, or any other urban area in Virginia, Richmond, Tidewater area or Roanoke. So anything we do to try to mitigate the impact of the storm water run off is up to us. Like our penny on the real estate tax that goes to storm water management we are funding that all ourselves. The Ag (agricultural) sector doesn't really understand where we are coming from, but I think that many of those people haven't really been here to observe what the situation really is. So, that's a challenge right now. The State Department of Conservation and Recreation is studying right now what might be done on urban BMP's and they are suppose to have a report to the General Assembly before the end of the Session.

Linda: What is a BMP's could you explain what they are?

Sally: Best Management Practices. It could be detention pond, retention pond, wet, dry, could be rain gardens, swails, any strategy that will help to hold back the storm water run off - rain barrels - so there are many.

Linda: You talked about the Agricultural areas in Virginia and there are many. What things do they do with State funds?

Sally: If they have horses the staff either the local Conservation District staff or the State will prepare a conservation plan so if they have horses they will take a look at what they do with the manure and if they see it is going to be running off into a stream, and many of these properties have streams on them, then they design a different holding facility. Also, you are supposed to keep your animals away from the water so that means a fence. On Agricultural land it can mean a buffer on the stream. Now, some of the farmers don't like this too much because they say you are taking away my land. But, it doesn't really have to be that wide a strip even 35 feet is helpful and if it is a vegetated buffer then it really helps to hold back the runoff. So we just finished our Virginia 2007 County Community Planning Committee, which was established to plan what Fairfax is going to do to celebrate its' 400th Anniversary of the founding of Jamestown in 1607. This was a very diverse group of people representing ethnicities, different interest areas and we decided that our Legacy Project which each participating jurisdiction was asked to produce. We decided ours would be the publication of a book and so the name of this book is the Fairfax Stories 1607 to 2007 and we solicited submission of articles to be judged. All articles submitted did not automatically get in the book. The articles could be on any historic topic that applied to Fairfax County. So they thought they would publish 16, maybe 4 for each century but it turned out that the book is 32 articles because they had so many submissions and it actually is a very interesting book. So the book is for sale right now both in hard back and soft back. The committee is pretty much finished its work because 2007 is over, but it was an interesting exercise. Okay, the Community Appearance Alliance for Northern Virginia includes Loudon and Prince William Counties, Arlington, Alexandria and Falls Church.

Linda: How did that get started?

Sally: A group of people several years ago, 15 to 20 years ago we would have an annual public policy seminar on some topic related to community appearance,

the aesthetics of your community and there are some very well known people around the country who would address this planning and try to ensure that you have a well designed community, but we gave up on it because after several years, people just didn't want to spend a whole day at a seminar and the hotels got very expensive. But, we do give awards every year and the next week we are presenting the 2007 awards for community appearance.

Linda: How do you judge this award?

Sally: The Board makes the decision.

Linda: Who can submit?

Sally: Anyone can submit and then we look at them all and then decide which ones are going to receive an award.

Linda: Give me an example of one of your winners.

Sally: I think it was a year ago, there is a car wash in Loudon County and I think it is right on Rt. 7 before you get into Leesburg that was renovated and it looks, or maybe at one time it was a fire department, and it is really neat. It doesn't look at all like a car wash; they did a wonderful job on it. We have even given VDOT awards for the design of the Amherst Bridge, and the Roberts Road Bridge which had community involvement in the design. We gave an award to the large residential development across from where Harris Teeter was in Fairfax City because once it got finished, it was great. While it was being built people rebelled and I think maybe that is why John Mason lost his campaign for Mayor because it seemed to overpower everything when you just saw the wood. We usually give 6 to 8 awards every year. The Air Force Memorial down by the Pentagon got one and the Marine Memorial and I can't remember the others this year. We publish a quarterly newsletter Community Appearance. One of the other environmental jobs that I have is with the Potomac Watershed Roundtable and this is the lower Potomac and it is a roundtable made up of elected officials, some staff people who are alternates, some state staff people who are non-voting members and some stakeholder members from different categories related to the environment. We just added a category for forestry, which is very important but we don't have all that many forests left here in Northern Virginia but this takes in a rather large

geographic area and goes down to Fredericksburg, so half way to Richmond. Supervisor Penny Gross is the Chair of the Roundtable now and the administrative arm is called the Potomac Council and I Chair that so that makes it very convenient to have two of us from Fairfax. What other things would you like to know about?

Linda: You were talking about the awards. Lets talk about some of the awards you have received over the years and your accomplishments within the community. The two that come to mind are the Environmental Stewardship Award and Citizen of the Year Award.

Sally: Yes I was very surprised last year when they selected me to be the Citizen of the Year to receive the Washington Post Cup, Wow!!

Linda: I attended that ceremony and it was a wonderful dinner and a delightful evening.

Sally: Yes, and then the Park Authority established an Environmental Stewardship award in my name this past year 2007. It won't be an annual award but just whenever they want to give an award.

Linda: Oh, that is wonderful.

Sally: Yes, that was a surprise as well. I was co-chair or chair of the Park Bond Referendum Committee the last four times (Linda: That's quite a job) I don't think they think about who else might do it, but they just say Sally will you do that again, and I say okay.

Linda: That entails quite a bit of work, doesn't it?

Sally: Well, you can make it as much work as you want but if you are organized it should go fairly well. I was on the Tyson's Corner Task Force back 15 years ago, that in 1994 produced the new plan for development of Tyson's Corner and their were two levels - with and without rail. The density capacity was what the county staff thought the transportation system could accommodate. But now the Tyson's Corner Task Force is recommending so much more density. Some people feel the more density, it doesn't matter that it will be accommodated but it

depends on someone's commute where they are coming from because a rail bus doesn't accommodate all the points of origin for commuters.

Linda: So back in 1994 when you came up with these two plans.....

Sally: Well it was just one but it had two levels.

Linda: Tell me more about the rail one?

Sally: Within that it said that if there is rail then their density could be higher and it told what it could be. But even in that 1994 Plan we had in there the necessity for a circulatory transit system in Tyson's Corner because you can't walk everywhere at Tyson's Corner and that still hasn't been provided and it really needs to be.

Linda: Where would the funding come from something like that?

Sally: I don't know.

Linda: Would it be from the businesses or another source

Sally: Well, Tytran which is an existing organization and is suppose to have some money - I think I would look to them for this type of infrastructure because without it you have people getting in their cars to go to lunch where as if you had the circulatory system, Jitney or whatever you want, you could just hop on and go where ever you want to go. Leave your car at the office. But, I am whistling Dixie on that one I guess.

Linda: Well now there is the alternative that they can do a tunnel and I believe in 1994 that wasn't even a glint in anyone's eye.

Sally: Yes it was.

Linda: It was, how interesting.

Sally: However staff said that it was too expensive.

Linda: Well, it will be interesting to see what develops at Tyson's Corner in the next 5 to 10 years.

Sally: I can't imagine. I think what they are going through right now in regard to the Federal Transit Administration is just ludicrous for them to suddenly find all these little things they are complaining about. I think that Governor Kaine is exactly right in asking them well, you tell us what do you want to address and we will do it. And, I think that is exactly the right approach.

Linda: Just so people know you are talking about the 900 million dollars that the

Sally: Federal Transit Administration that we want them to approve for allocation by the Federal Government to the rail to Dulles and Tyson's. This has been in the works for a long, long time. So what else would you like?

Linda: What are some of your fondest memories of living here in Fairfax County, specifically in Mantua because I guess you have lived here for how many years did you say?

Sally: 1965 so it is 42 years. Well Mantua impressed us when we first saw it because of all the trees. When this community, the bulk of Mantua is called Mantua Hills and there are several sub divisions but they are all called Mantua Hills, section whatever. It was started back around 1960 and it was not completed when we moved here. But the developers left the trees as much as possible. We have taken down so many trees of necessity but it's really nice in the summer to see all of this green and it makes it cooler. If you come home from the shopping center, you know it is oppressive in the shopping center in the parking lot, and you pull in your driveway and open the door and say, ooh isn't this nice, because it is appreciatively cooler in the shade and it is a filter. We just had a contest to try to determine who has the largest tree and it was really big. It was about 14 ½ feet in diameter.

Linda: That is really large. Where is that tree located?

Sally: It may be down by the trail; there were a couple of them down by the trail. But that was sort of fun. Our neighbor has a few very large trees.

Linda: You have a number in your yard.

Sally: Yes. So I have enjoyed living here not just the house, which I find very livable, but the environment and then we have the Accotink Creek, which runs through the community, which is in rather sad condition but we are suppose to start soon on a new Mission Plan, right - for the Accotink Creek Watershed. But it just indicates that when our community was built in the early 1960's there were no storm water mitigation measures that were either required or done and so even today the local shopping center, which is Pickett in Fair City Mall when it rains they have storm drainage ducts along the curb so everything goes down there if it is small enough and it goes right down the pipe and comes out in the flood plain and then into the creek, no mitigation measures at all.

Linda: That is too bad.

Sally: Yes. Now newer communities, and I don't know when they started requiring mitigation measures but here it was early to late mid 60's and we didn't have that requirement yet, by the county. So you see a lot of impact.

Linda: And now that has changed?

Sally: Well but it is not retrofitted. The requirements are different but no one has to go back and retrofit so the impact continues which is not very nice. I gave you a press clipping on grass roots, which I think is kind of, fun. That is our old wall down at route 50 entrance and a group of us are here.

Linda: This is the entrance of Mantua; a photograph of a number of people will be in your file, I will make a copy of this.

Linda: Is there anything else in the future that you would like people to know about Providence District?

Sally: Well, Providence District sits in the middle of the county so I always look at it as the potpourri. It's quite diverse and there are several retail office areas in addition to the residential areas. It's not as spread out as it was at one time, I always said that Providence District looked like Woody the Woodpecker, but since that time Woody lost its' tail feathers which is the Green Briar area out on the

Western end. But even though we are quite diverse I think we have a nice relationship among the people in Providence.

Linda: I think so too.

Sally: Which is good and we have quite a variety of housing stock, a lot of office area. When the Merrifield Towne Center comes on line that will make an immense difference. It will give a whole new feel to the Merrifield area because that was like a poor cousin before, nothing was happening to it and so I think this new town center is going to make quite an improvement.

Linda: And that has certainly has changed that area over the years. One of the people we have interviewed is Dolly Hill whose family goes back to her great, great grandfather who rode in the Black Calvary up San Juan Hill in front of Teddy Roosevelt and the family had owned a parcel of land over in the Merrifield area for generations and have gone to church there, it was very interesting. We also interviewed Michael Collier of Uniwest who is in the process of establishing those buildings and several of them are pretty much complete now.

Sally: Along Gallows, but not the ones behind.

Linda: Yes exactly. Where the theater is that will be developed.

Sally: Yes and that will be the Towne Center. The Uniwest is just the entrance end.

Linda: Yes and it is quite impressive and quite attractive I think, and with the Metro so close and they will be providing transportation

Sally: Of course Gallows is suppose to be this beautiful Boulevard, do you think we will ever see that?

Linda: Someone will I hope.

Sally: Someone will whether we do, I don't know. But Merrifield was just a smattering of different small companies. Now I see that our one and only big grocery store there at Gallows and Rt. 29 is now an Asian grocery store as is the

one where Best use to be by Luther Jackson School as is what use to be the old Giant in the Yorktown Shopping Center.

Linda: That is interesting.

Sally: So there are no quote American grocery stores in that area anymore and this bothers me because Asian groceries are nice, but not to have all the grocery stores as Asian.

Linda: So that means that whole area has changed considerably since the 60's and 70's?

Sally: Oh it has been only in the last 3 or 4 years. The Giant at Yorktown closed and the Giant at Pickett across from Woodson High School closed and they built a new Giant down at Loehman's Plaza and people say they are not going to drive down to Loehman's Plaza to go to the grocery store. So we did not have the foresight when we were planning this to specify what kind of grocery store. We didn't even think about it and I don't think you could anyway, I think it would be arbitrary.

Linda: Yes. Is there anything else you would like to mention?

Sally: I don't think so unless you have some questions I will give you some papers here that you can take with you.

Linda: Well, I thank you very much for this interview.

Sally: You are very welcome.